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“Filling gaps and removing traps
for sustainable resource management”

Human-Wildlife Conflict in Tropical Agriculture: The Case of Sri Lanka

SÖREN KÖPKE¹, SISIRA WITHANACHCHI², RUWAN PATHIRANAGE³

¹*University of Kassel, Section of International Agricultural Policy and Environmental Governance, Germany*

²*University of Kassel, Germany, Specialized Partnerships in Sustainable Food Systems and Food Sovereignty,*

³*Protect Sri Lanka, Colombo,*

Abstract

In rural Sri Lanka, human-wildlife conflict has increasingly become a hindrance to sustainable development in different aspects. In small-scale farming, a number of animal species are ravaging crops, contributing to the socio-economic insecurity of peasant cultivators. Also, wild animals are threatening the safety of villagers. On the other hand, efforts to protect endangered species are undermined by lack of acceptance by rural populations due to problems associated with wildlife. National policies are marred by inconsistencies due to conflicting interest, split between nature conservation and the protection of crops and livestock. What is more, deforestation and destruction of habitats have occurred throughout the country over decades or even centuries. It has been argued that modern agricultural production systems exacerbate the situation through adverse impacts on ecosystems, e.g. in excessive use of agrochemicals. There are indications that traditional farming methods may be more suitable to foster cohabitation with wildlife.

Human-elephant conflict in Sri Lanka gains the most attention, as more than 250 of the threatened Sri Lankan Elephant (*elephas maximus maximus*) have been killed annually by humans over the last years, and an average of 70 people per year die in encounters with wild elephants. Also, in recent years there has been evidence of increased illicit killings of leopards (*Panthera pardus kotiya*), likely in reaction to livestock predation and isolated attacks on humans. Beyond elephants and leopards, less threatened animals like peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*) and monkeys are perceived as agricultural pests.

The paper is based on field interviews and secondary data analysis. It employs a political ecology approach as a theoretical framework, highlighting the impact of state-led development programs and economic processes on nature protection. The study also incorporates insights from the upcoming field of human-animal studies; most specifically, it questions overtly managerial concepts of wildlife and highlights the specific agency of animals in their encounter with humans. It seeks to combine cultural, socio-economic, political, geographic and ecological factors to provide a better understanding of human-wildlife conflict in the country. In identifying the most crucial variables driving conflict, the authors would like to contribute to efforts to enhance animal and human wellbeing.

Keywords: Human-animal studies, human-Elephant conflict, social-ecological dynamics, Sri Lanka, wildlife management conflict

Contact Address: Sören Köpke, University of Kassel, Section of International Agricultural Policy and Environmental Governance, Steinstraße 19, 37213 Witzenhausen, Germany, e-mail: soeren.koepke@web.de